

S. MENDELSON

**THE BATTLE
OF THE WARSAW GHETTO**





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THE BATTLE
OF THE WARSAW GHETTO

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This paper was read at the eighteenth annual conference of the Yiddish Scientific Institute on January 9, 1944. The speaker a well-known public leader in prewar Warsaw and a member of the Executive Board of this Institute.

The paper was delivered in Yiddish and is published in the *Yivo Bleter*, Journal of the Yiddish Scientific Institute, XXIII, 1 (January-February, 1944). In view of the contemporary and historical interest of the subject, the Executive Board of the Institute resolved to issue this material in English translation and thus have its contents brought to the attention of American public opinion.

YIDDISH SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE

Max Weinreich,
Research Director

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It is as yet impossible to give a complete picture of the resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto and the struggles that took place in the streets of Białystok, Nieśwież and Krynki. The material is as yet too scarce. In the present war, and in Jewish history, this resistance is an event of such scope and magnitude that each fact is important, each detail significant. It is therefore necessary to collect whatever information is available, so as to have at least a partial picture of what occurred in the Ghettos in the year 1943.

I am conscious of the great responsibility in assembling the material and presenting it to you. Any exaggeration is desecration, any underestimation a crime. I shall faithfully follow the documents at hand.

What data do we possess and to what extent are they reliable? We have four kinds of sources, not all equally valuable.

1. *Underground Reports.* Reports from the underground movement are the most reliable and, it has been shown, the most trustworthy of all. Unfortunately there exist no reports that describe the actual unfolding of the struggle. Probably many writers of previous reports fell in battle and those who remained alive have been primarily concerned with saving all who could be saved. It is also possible that those who escaped are engaged in one of the dozens of new guerrilla units and fighting groups. Previous underground reports, however, provide us with important facts about the period just prior to the revolt and the preparations for it.

2. Of particular significance is the information published in the *Polish underground press*. These are reports written on the spot. True, they do not come from people who actively par-

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ticipated in the struggle, but often from those who were in contact with the fighters inside the Ghetto. The descriptions have an air of genuineness, of directness about them. Details are lacking, but what information there is gives us a picture of the events. I must emphasize, however, that not all Polish underground papers are equally reliable. There are among them some that have remained faithful to Polish prewar reactionary antisemitism. Even when faced with the unprecedented revolt in the Ghetto, neither writers nor editors were able to free themselves of their Jew-hatred. The Labor, Peasant and Democratic underground press, on the other hand, described the heroic battles with much warmth and admiration.

3. The reports of the *representative of the Polish government*, who stays permanently and secretly in the country, are an important source of information. These lengthy accounts, sent to the government-in-exile in London, are of course concerned not only with things Jewish but describe in an over-all picture life in Nazi-occupied Poland. This fact makes the reports both advantageous and disadvantageous for our purpose: advantageous because they give us a clear picture of the background upon which the events took place; disadvantageous because, due to the wealth and variety of material conveyed, generalizations and comment rather than hard facts are frequently presented. Comment is always subjective and politically colored.

4. There is one more source of information—*accounts of witnesses* who escaped from Nazi-dominated territory. It is obvious that these accounts must be scrutinized with the greatest caution. Legal psychology has taught us beyond doubt that even when two people simultaneously observe the same event (even one that does not compare in scope with the revolt in the Ghettos) they can describe it in entirely dissimilar manner, although each honestly believes his version to be fully correct. In our case the matter is even more complicated. Not a single person who actually took part in the battles of the Ghetto has been able to escape abroad. All those who are now reporting details of the revolt left Poland, or at least Warsaw, months before the actual

outbreak. Such is the case, for instance, of the underground delegate who is now in London going sometimes by the name of Klonowski, sometimes Warszawski and sometimes a third name, and who describes the struggle in great detail. He is said to have left the Warsaw Ghetto in September, 1942, and Poland in March, 1943. His descriptions, therefore, are based on stories he has heard, not on events in which he himself took part. In the account I shall give you here, I shall ignore almost completely the reports made by persons who managed to escape from Poland.

Before we deal with the battles themselves, we must dwell for a moment on the state of mind in which the Jews of the Ghetto found themselves prior to the revolt. Let me start with the terrible and tragic date of July 22, 1942, when the German authorities began their murderous liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto. On that day the Gestapo demanded from the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) that it supply for deportation to the East from six to ten thousand persons daily. The head of the Council, Engineer Czerniakow, in protest against this demand, committed suicide. All reports and documents mark July 22 as the day of his death, except for the diary of a Polish official, published in London a short time ago, which gives July 24 as the correct date. The underground publications and reports characterized this suicide as an act that deeply stirred the Jewish population and, for a short time, even frightened the German authorities. Once again, only the just mentioned diary reports that certain sections of the Jewish community condemned this step of their leader and believed that it had been his duty rather to call the population to active or passive resistance against the invader.

I personally think that this attitude towards Czerniakow's suicide developed only later, when everybody had begun to realize that the mass deportation actually meant mass extinction.

The German authorities, according to the report of the Polish government representative, reckoned with the possibility of armed resistance at the time when there were still half a million Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. They were afraid of it; they wished to avoid it for a number of reasons. The purpose

of the deportation, then, was quickly to destroy the Jewish population morally and to liquidate it physically.

Jewish life in the Ghetto had been, in spite of hunger and persecution, well organized. The Jewish community, locked as it was behind the Ghetto walls of the country, had regained its spiritual, moral and political equilibrium. Group coherence had become strong.* It was the aim of the Nazi invader to demoralize the Jewish population, break its backbone, make it mentally incapable of coordinated action. It was Hitler's well-known method against all peoples he wished to conquer. The notices regarding deportation thus announced that the population was to be transported to work in various factories and farms. The huge posters displayed by the Germans, which Czerniakow was required to have endorsed, announced that families would be allowed to go together, to take some of their belongings with them and that they would all be settled for peaceful work. The deported Jews of France used to enquire for the "Estate of Treblinka"—Treblinka being the spot where Jews were slaughtered in gas chambers. These notices were presented to a population which for months already had been living in the horror of things to come. Simultaneously, the machinery of the Jewish auxiliary police was utilized by the Germans to spread rumors about the favorable labor conditions which awaited the deported.

There were many—one report puts them at twenty thousand, another at thirty thousand, and one underground paper even mentions the figure of forty thousand—who reported voluntarily at the *Umschlagplatz* (deportation center) on Stawki Street in Warsaw. A picture that can drive one's mind to insanity — thousands of men and women going voluntarily to their death.

Several days after the first deportations, when thousands of Jews already lay asphyxiated in the gas chambers of Treblinka, letters were rumored to have arrived from the deported describ-

* Cf. S. Mendelsohn, *The Polish Jews behind the Nazi Ghetto Walls*, New York, Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1942, 31 pp.

ing how well they were in their new localities. One official report to the Polish government says:

During the first days of deportation the underground movement, through handbills, warned against the trap and called at least for passive resistance. The population, however, was so caught in fear on the one hand, and false feverish hopes on the other that nobody would listen to the call.

Day in day out, thousands were either dragged from Warsaw or reported voluntarily for deportation. By the sixth day everybody realized what the German actions meant. Nobody had illusions any longer. Positive information had sifted through on the destination of those railway cars, packed as they were with human beings and sprinkled with quick lime. Despite the desperate *desire* on the part of the unhappy inhabitants of the Ghetto to believe the Germans, to live at any price, the devil's game was unmasked. For a time the frantic efforts continued to get the German labor certificates, showing that the holder was working in a German war factory; bearers of such notes were considered safe. People were still hypnotized by the magic power of these papers which could spell life. But all this did not last long. The abyss of death opened. The Nazis had achieved their purpose. The Ghetto inhabitants, awakened to deadly fear, were deprived of will power, made incapable of action. As the Polish government report puts it:

Through the streets of Warsaw wandered pale shadows, their eyes frightened, visionless. They ran from street to street, in the delusion that perhaps on the next street the danger might not be as great. Carloads of dead children rumbled over the pavements. Corpses lay unburied on the sidewalks.

The Germans had achieved their purpose. With only the help of Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Latvian battalions assigned to the Ghetto and a large part of the demoralized Jewish auxiliary police, the Gestapo carried on its murderous work. I do not intend to give you a detailed account of this period. It is not part of my task. I simply wanted to sketch the events of the deportation period so as to show why there was no revolt at that time. Active resistance was impossible because the Jewish pop-

ulation was unarmed; passive resistance was broken even before it began by the machinations of the Gestapo.

Deportations continued for weeks. On the borders of the Ghetto two separate Jewish quarters completely disconnected from each other, were formed: one—the so-called "Small Ghetto", comprising only a few streets with a population of about 6,000, mostly workers in German war factories—and the "Large Ghetto", with a population of about 40,000.

At the end of 1942 there were a few months of comparative quiet. The hangman rested. Fear reigned in the emptied streets of Warsaw. Terrified eyes peered into the blackness of the night. Ears were strained. One always listened to the hollow sound of the murderer's boot—thus those days are described in the official report of the Polish government representative.

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While the deportations and murders were still in full swing, the idea of revolt was born.

We first learn of it in an account from the Jewish underground movement, despatched from Warsaw on August 31, 1942. It reads:

The entire Ghetto lives in the atmosphere of nervous strain, unimaginable horror and helpless despair, and as a result there are even more frequent cases of insanity and suicide. Parents are known to have poisoned their children, and children to have poisoned their parents to save them from torture. Here and there people resisted actively. Barricades were erected in some buildings and in certain towns, in Nieśwież for instance, armed resistance took place. These scattered cases, however, remained sporadic and rare, as the populations were being liquidated. There never was, nor is there, mass resistance. The first reason is that the unhappy victims still try to fool themselves into believing that "evacuation" means no more than transfer to other localities. This illusion is wilfully nourished by the German authorities to crush the will to fight.

A contributory factor is also the unwarranted hope of certain sections that they will not be affected by "evacuation". The second reason is that the Jewish population is acutely aware that the Nazi system in all such cases applies the principle of collective respon-

sibility. They know therefore that resistance would spell immediate wholesale execution. Those who favor active resistance are thus faced with the tragic choice: have they the right to lead to certain death those who might yet have a chance at survival? They also know that their acts of resistance will not produce any echo abroad and, mainly, that there is no hope for assistance from outside the Ghetto walls.

The maturer sections of the working class and intelligentsia have no doubts as to the necessity of armed resistance in spite of the fact that it could never assume wider scope in the atmosphere deliberately created by the Germans both inside the Ghetto and out. The more conservative groups are categorically opposed to the idea of resistance, because, in revenge, the German rulers would resort to complete annihilation of the Jews. Thus, every chance at resistance is paralyzed since those among the Jews who would actively participate in it dare not bear the responsibility for the total annihilation of the Jewish population.

These coolly reasoning words of the report from the underground movement contain a tragedy unsurpassed. On the one hand there is the clear awareness of the moral and political duty to rise against the foe, to fall gun in hand—on the other hand, the fearful risk and the heavy burden of impending collective responsibility. We note, however, that the will to resist had already developed during those horrible days of deportation. Hitler did not succeed in breaking the spirit of all his victims.

Other reports show us in part what was meant by the words: "Here and there people resisted actively." Fire, for example, was set to about 100 warehouses which belonged to the German administration and an unsuccessful attempt was made on the personnel of the *Umsiedlungsamt* on Żelazna Street.

The Large Ghetto of Warsaw began to recuperate. According to the accounts of the Polish underground newspaper *Przez Walkę do Zwycięstwa* (a democratic peasant periodical) of December 15, 1942, the greater part of the remaining population consisted of the young and middle-aged, comparatively healthy and able-bodied. The determination to resist gained strength among them. A report of the underground Jewish labor movement dated as early as October 1942 reads in part:

We shall never forgive the commandant [of the underground Polish military organization] for refusing us arms so that we can die as men.

The period of preparation for armed revolt began. In a letter of December 17, 1942, from London, the unforgettable Szmul Zygelbojm* writes:

I worry now about the problem of the next steps I have to take in the [Polish] National Council and the demands I have to make of the government. The most important question is this: at home [in Poland] there is a split on whether the time is ripe for armed revolt against the invader. All Polish organizations without exception are opposed to it, because it would only destroy and drain the blood of the people without any results. For this reason the Jewish masses were denied the arms to fight against German annihilation.

Zygelbojm believed, and rightly so, that an uprising must be organized even if it would not lead to a general revolt in the country. The question was discussed by the Polish National Council in secret session. I do not have the right to give you details of that meeting. But by the end of December or the beginning of January, the Jewish underground began to receive arms. This was due partly to that secret session of the National Council, but in the main it was a result of negotiations and co-operation between Jewish and non-Jewish resistance groups in Poland itself.

January 1943 witnessed a revival of rumors that a complete liquidation of the Ghetto was in the offing. We read in the newspaper *Przez Walkę do Zwycięstwa* of January 20, 1943:

After a lengthy interval, the further liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto began anew on the 18th and 19th of this month. The Germans have already either killed on the spot or deported between 5,000 and 10,000 people, from among the remaining population of 40,000 who had survived from the original 400,000 persons in the Ghetto. Thus only 30,000 to 35,000 inhabitants have remained. Among others the Germans have deported all employees of the Supply Department and almost all physicians. The result is hunger and epidemics. We must emphasize and extend our admiration to the Fighter Unit which during the latest liquidation met the Gestapo with gun in hands.

* Szmul Zygielbojm, also known in the labor movement as *Arthur*, was a member of the Polish National Council in London. On May 11, 1943, he committed suicide in protest against the indifference with which the Allied powers and the whole civilized world observed the extermination of millions of European Jews by Nazi Germany.

Shooting broke out and developed into a real battle on Zamenhofa Street from where Gestapo agents and German police had to flee and to which they returned only with reinforcements. Jews defended themselves with hand grenades and revolvers. Twenty Gestapo agents and police are dead and many more wounded.

The underground newspaper *Rzeczpospolita Polska* of January 25, 1943, wrote:

On January 18 of this year, at dawn, strong S.S. detachments, German police and Latvian forces marched into the Ghetto. They encountered something they had never expected. Some Jews had barricaded themselves inside apartment blocks. A bitter struggle ensued. The Fighter Organization of the underground movement had stored guns and ammunition. The fighting continued for several days. On Saturday, January 23, German tanks entered the Ghetto. A number of buildings were burned.

The first news of the revolt had reached this country from the Jewish underground movement. This is what it said:

In January the Germans began liquidating the remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto. The Jews resisted. Dozens of Germans and hundreds of Jews were killed. Among the dead are Mirmelstein, Choldenko and Giterman. After three days of fighting the Germans ceased action and deported 6,000 Jews.

Everywhere in Poland the liquidation of the Jews continues. The Nazis plan to complete the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto by the middle of February.

Ring the alarm throughout the world! Appeal to the Pope that he officially intervene, and appeal to the Allies immediately to take extraordinary steps against the Germans who are in their hands.

We suffer horribly. The remaining few hundred thousand Jews are in danger of imminent extermination. Only you can save us. The responsibility before history is on you!

Examining carefully the different documents relating to the January resistance of the Jewish population, we find that

- (1) the fighting lasted almost *eight* days;
- (2) it was conducted mainly by the Fighter Organization without the participation of the general population;
- (3) the Germans suffered several dozen casualties while the number of Jewish dead is not known;
- (4) a number of buildings were burned in revenge and their occupants murdered.

Now begin the three intermediate months between the first and second resistance. We have no information as to what happened in the Ghetto during this period. I do not mean the murders perpetrated by the Germans. I am thinking of the internal organization, the political and the spiritual preparations among the approximate 40,000 people for the incomparable, historic act. In a feverish atmosphere a tremendous amount of work must have been accomplished. To arm a great part of the population under the conditions prevailing in the Ghetto, to organize leadership, to divide the city into defense sections, to dig tunnels for communication with the part of the city outside the Ghetto walls—all this demanded extraordinary discipline, an unimaginable will, tremendous self-sacrifice and sublime revolutionary strength. Human dignity, Jewish pride and revolutionary tradition must have combined to organize and plan a war which everyone knew would be lost. Is this not an act that our rational minds are incapable of comprehending?

An underground report relates:

[Before the outbreak of the battles] an open duel in words was conducted on the walls of the Ghetto houses by the Jewish underground movement and the Germans. Walter Tebbens, the Nazi commandant in charge of moving industrial plants from the Ghetto, issued appeals to disclaim the rumors that deportation meant extinction.

This is the text of the appeal that Tebbens issued on March 20, a month prior to the revolt:

"To the Jewish war industry workers in the Jewish district of Warsaw:

"On the eve of March 15 the Command of the Fighter Organization posted a placard which I want to refute.

"Jewish war industry workers! Do not believe those who wish to confuse you. They wish to incite you to bring about consequences which will be inevitable. There is no security at all in their shelters and life there is impossible, just as it is impossible for Jews in the Aryan district. Insecurity and inactivity by themselves will morally break down those who are used to work.

"Jewish workers! Go to Trawniki, go to Poniatów, because there you will be able to live and survive the war. Take your wives and children with you, because they too will be taken care of."

Tebbens' appeal did not stop the underground fighters. The

Ghetto had thrown off its deadly stupor. The slave house became transformed into a palace of glorious heroism.

In the middle of April the Nazis announced that 5,000 Jews must report on Stawki Street for deportation. The first transport soon departed. The underground Polish newspaper *Polska* of April 29, 1943, writes:

Several Jews in that transport managed to escape. They brought back horrible news. It turned out that the transport from the Ghetto stopped not far from Warsaw. There the Jews were ordered to dig their own graves, which were then surrounded by machine guns. A second transport was scheduled to follow on April 20, Hitler's birthday. This news terrified the Ghetto. Its streets emptied. People vanished from the streets, the workshops, homes and factories. The Gestapo began searching, dragging forth the women and children as hostages. They assembled them on the Jewish cemetery, ordered them to dig graves and wait there for their men. But as a reply from the seemingly empty houses came flying bullets and hand grenades. Roofs and attics began to spit fire and to rain death on the German police. Fear descended on Hitler's henchmen. They fled in confusion.

The official government representative thus describes the battle:

The fight began on the eve of April 19. Armed German detachments surrounded the Ghetto, then marched in to complete its liquidation. They came in numerous, heavily armed S. S. detachments on cars mounted with machine guns and on tanks. Ukrainian, Latvian and Lithuanian detachments supported the S.S. The Jewish fighters began the battle as soon as the Germans marched in.

The first period of struggle lasted a week. The actions of the defenders were perfectly coordinated and the battles were fought on practically the entire territory of the Ghetto. Jewish resistance was brilliantly planned, so that in spite of the vast superiority in men and matériel on the German side, good results were achieved. In the first days of combat the Germans took severe punishment: hundreds of them were killed and more wounded. Several times they had to retreat behind the Ghetto walls. During that first week the battle had all the characteristics of regular military operations. The din of a tremendous cannonade was constantly heard from the Ghetto.

Due to their defeats during the first two days, the Germans changed their tactics on April 21st and attacked one by one the points

of resistance by fire (with incendiaries dropped from the air, incendiary grenades and flame throwers) as well as by heavy artillery. Many fires were started in the Ghetto. For strategic reasons the Germans set fire also to three "Aryan" houses on Długa Street outside the Ghetto, having forced the removal of the inhabitants on fifteen minutes' notice. Many cannons were posted in the streets around the Ghetto, heavy machine guns were placed on the neighboring houses and the beleaguered Jews were viciously attacked.

The Germans dared enter the Ghetto itself only by daylight. During the nights they retreated, guarding the approaches to the Ghetto and shooting constantly. The Jewish fighters succeeded several times in breaking out of their fortified positions.

On April 23rd the Germans took the central and outer parts of the Ghetto. The combat zone then moved further north. Here the main battle continued. But even in the conquered parts strong guerrilla activity was maintained. The main strength of the Jewish defenders was now concentrated near Okopowa Street and Powązkowska. German planes began attacking this area with incendiary bombs. The Jews replied by setting fire to the German factories situated there and to the ammunition depots, first capturing the ammunition.

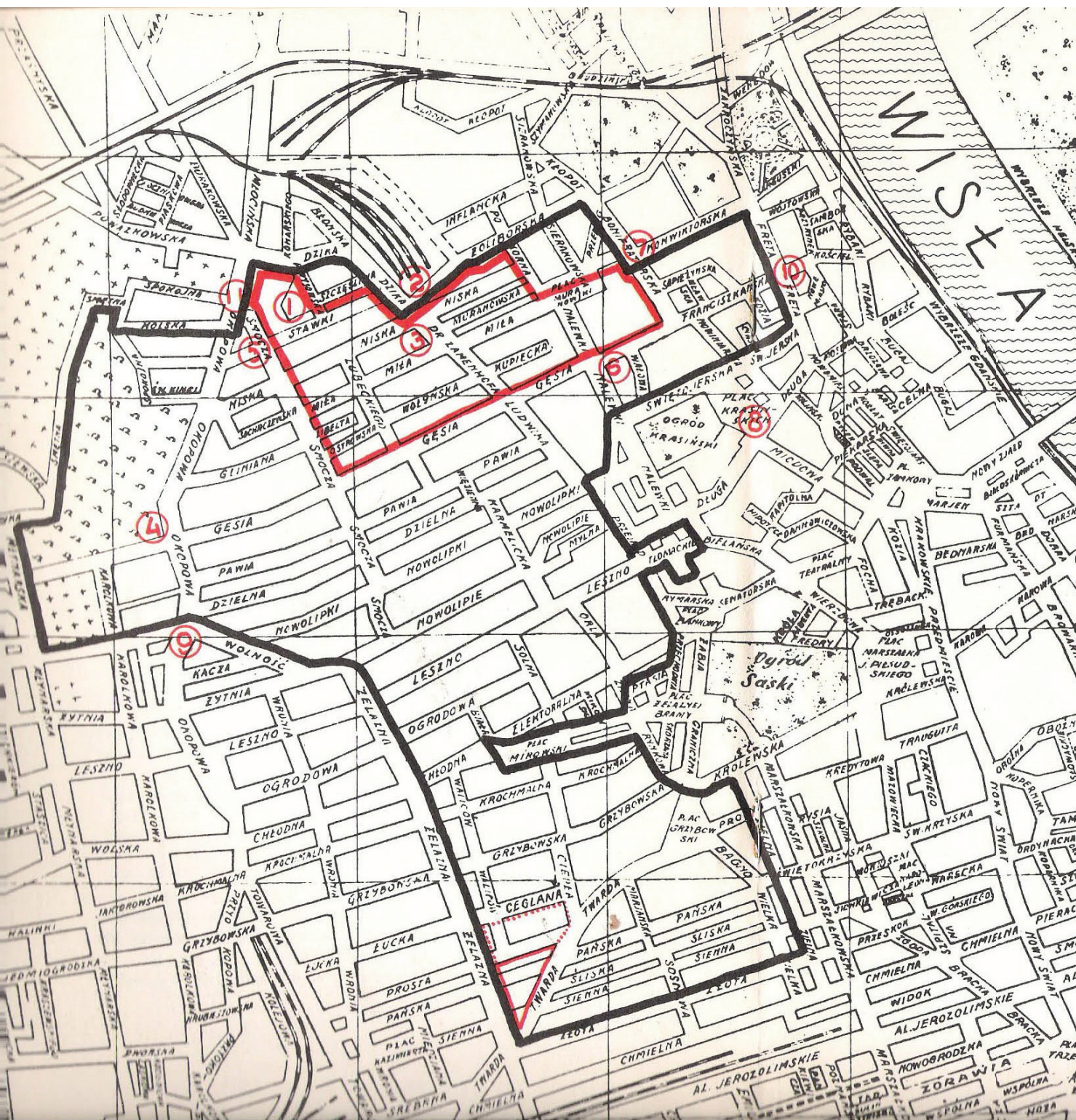
The burning in the Ghetto kept spreading. The fires were becoming intolerable. After six days of further combat, after the Germans had already been using planes, artillery and tanks, they managed to break into the northern part of the Ghetto, too. The regular military action lasted about a week. By April 28th the Germans had thrown into the battle 6,000 heavily armed troops. Estimates place the number of German dead at between 1,000 and 1,200. The Jews lost about 3,000 to 5,000 during the same period.

This is the account of the government representative. The Polish underground newspaper *Polska* adds the following details in the above mentioned issue of April 29, 1943:

The Jewish service organizations, like the hospital personnel and the firemen, took part in the military operations. The latter were particularly concerned with localizing the fires which broke out as a result of the bombardments. The Jews had prepared a number of wells in the courtyards in time, foreseeing that the Germans might cut off the water supply.

The next period of the struggle began when regular military operations gave way to guerrilla warfare. The report of the government representative continues:

At the time of writing, at the close of the fifth week of the Jewish-German war, the Jews have not yet ceased their bitter resist-



THE BATTLES IN THE WARSAW GHETTO IN APRIL 1943

The heavy black line encircles the territory of the Ghetto according to the German regulations of October 16 and 21, 1940.

On the borders of this Ghetto two separate Jewish quarters, completely disconnected from each other, were formed.

The heavy red line encircles the reduced Ghetto which the Germans set up at the end of September 1942 after most of the Jewish population had already been deported from Warsaw. This the Germans called the "Large Ghetto".

The thin red line shows the demarcations of the so-called "Small Ghetto" which was cut from the southwestern corner of the former Ghetto at the end of September 1942 (one source indicates that it was bounded by Żelazna, Twarda and Prosta; another that it reached Ceglana). This Ghetto was liquidated some time between May 3 and 18th, 1943.

The following information is based on the accounts of the Polish underground press.

(1) The place on Stawki Street where the Jews were ordered to report for deportation.

(2) The railroad siding at Stawki from which the Jews of Warsaw were deported "to an unknown destination".

(3) The section where the first revolt in January occurred, (Zamenhofa, Dzika, Niska, Stawki).

(4) The Jewish cemetery where the Gestapo assembled in the middle of April women and children as hostages.

(5) and (6) Stawki and Nalewki, the two points through which the S. S. entered the large Ghetto on April 19 to liquidate it.

(7) On the corner of Bonifraterska and Konwiktorska a German patrol of five was shot on April 20.

(8) On Długa Street outside the Ghetto, on April 21 or 22, the Germans set fire to three "Aryan" houses in order better to attack the Ghetto.

(9) On the eve of April 23 a group of Jewish fighters attempted to break out of the Ghetto through Wolność Street, but the fire of German machine-guns drove them back.

(10) The evening of April 23 a bomb was thrown on a German automobile on Freta Street. Several S. S. men were killed.

(11) The vicinity of Okopowa and Powązkowska, the place of the last stand of the Jewish defenders.

ance. This is proven, among others, by the fact that Red Cross ambulances are frequently seen evacuating German dead or wounded from the Ghetto. The Germans are extremely cautious in their attempts to bring the Ghetto to submission. They are displaying extraordinary cowardice. Their main methods are setting fire to buildings, blowing them up with dynamite, or flooding the cellars where Jewish fighters hide. The rebels begin their chief activities at nightfall. It is already three weeks that building after building, street after street, are being burned. Specialists believe that the fires in the Ghetto are the greatest Europe has ever known in its history.

The underground newspaper *Biuletyn Informacyjny* reports on May 4, 1943:

The Germans have started blowing up the sewer exits through which Jews attempted to escape outside the city. Resistance was broken mainly by the fires that were set by the Germans. These fires have destroyed hundreds of buildings in the area of the Ghetto. The streets Nalewki, Nowolipki, Karmelicka, Niska, Miła, Muranowska, Smocza, Gęsia have been burned completely. Not one house remains standing.

The armed resistance started on April 19th had become a people's war in the truest sense of the word. All sections of the Jewish population of 40,000 partook in the struggle; some with gun in hand, some by service work, others by bringing medical aid to the wounded. That is the vital characteristic and the historic significance of the revolt. It was prepared by an underground Coordination Committee (of the General Jewish Workers Alliance and the Jewish National Committee) and carried through heroically by the Jewish people at large.

The Jewish Fighter Organization was headed by the Command which actually lead the revolt.

I shall not deal in detail with German bestiality during the struggle. It reached a stage of horror beyond description. A few facts only, as reported by the underground press, shall be stated here. Inside the improvised Jewish hospital the sick were shot in their beds. Jews who managed to escape from the burning buildings were either shot or driven back into the flames.

On the fifth day of battle, the Jewish Fighter Organization issued the following appeal to the non-Jewish population of Warsaw:

"Poles, citizens, soldiers for freedom! From under the beating of the cannons which the German army is hammering against our houses, the homes of our mothers, wives and children; from under the blow of the machine guns, which we have captured in the struggle against the cowardly German police and S. S. forces; from under the smoke of conflagration and the blood of the murdered Warsaw Ghetto, we, slaves of the Ghetto, send you our greetings. We know that with heartfelt sorrow and tears of sympathy, with admiration and terror you witness the epilogue of the battle we have carried on for several days against the cruel invader.

"But you see also that each threshold in the Ghetto has been until now and will continue to be a stronghold. We may all die in this battle, but we will not succumb. We breathe, as you do, with the desire for revenge and punishment for all the crimes of our common enemy.

This is a battle for our and your freedom.

For your and our human, social and national honor.

We shall avenge the crimes of Oświęcim, Treblinka, Bełżec and Majdanek.

Long live the brotherhood of battle and blood of fighting Poland.

Long live freedom.

Death to the hangmen.

Long live the life and death struggle against the invader.

Another appeal of the Command reads as follows:

People of Warsaw!

We realize that the Polish underground movement pays homage to the fighters of the Ghetto. But only the United Nations can give immediate and concrete aid.

In the name of the millions of murdered Jews; in the name of all those who were burned, tortured and slaughtered; in the name of those who are still fighting heroically though condemned to certain death in an unequal struggle, we call to the world to listen to us today.

The Allies must avenge our death and our suffering, so that even the bestial enemy may understand why he is being punished. Our Allies must finally realize that a tremendous historic responsibility will fall upon those who remained passive in face of the unbelievable Nazi crime against a whole people whose tragic epilogue we witness today. The desperate heroism of the people of the Ghetto must stir the world to an action equal to the greatness of the moment!

The appeal leaves no doubt that the fighters thought not only of dying with dignity but also of arousing the conscience of

the world. They overcame the fear that was expressed in the underground report of August 31, 1942, that no one outside would come to the aid of the Ghetto. They believed that the heroic fight would force the Allies to act against Hitler's headmen and thus prevent further slaughters. Those who fell perhaps believed in it to their very last breath. Those who remained alive must carry deep in their hearts their bitter disillusionment. For months, the world at large had not realized the great meaning of the revolt in the Ghetto. I shall later deal with the way in which the revolt was mirrored in the non-Jewish section of Poland. But, with the great pain of humiliation, we must admit that the call to the world remained unheard. Unheard were not only the voices of the two small towns of Krynki and Nieśwież about whose struggles we unfortunately know nothing but that they took place, but even the great battle of the Warsaw Ghetto did not accomplish this purpose. That this happened was not the guilt of the fighters. They were guilty only of credulity.

When and how did the battle of the Warsaw Ghetto come to an end? It is difficult to answer the question. From the underground newspaper *Nowe Drogi* of June 20, 1943, we learn that guerrilla action on the part of the Jews still remaining in the Ghetto has not ceased. Reports of November 1943 inform that the whole Ghetto is destroyed and empty. German marauders still loiter there seeking loot in the ruined buildings.

The underground publication of the Polish Labor Movement, *W.R.N.* writes on May 26, 1943:

Although four weeks have already passed since the outbreak of armed resistance in the Ghetto, smoke still rises in the northern part of the city. We still hear explosions. These are the last sounds of battle. The entire district is burned, and under its ruins lie those who would not submit to the hangman.

It is difficult to estimate the number of dead. It is possible that between 25,000 and 30,000 have been killed. They died a death more dignified than their brethren who were murdered in Treblinka and Bełżec.

They have fallen fighting. Theirs was the spirit of Warsaw, that has always directed the citizens of Poland's capital on the path of honor to battle.

All reports lead us to believe that guerrilla fighting continued for about two months and cost the Germans many casualties. Those Jews who hid in the ruins of apartment houses destroyed during the bombardment of 1939 were slowly and horribly liquidated by the Nazis. Now and then in underground newspapers, in reports of the Polish government representative, we glean data of German cruelty in annihilating the remnants of the Jewish population in the Warsaw Ghetto. I shall not quote them. Suffice it to state that in the way of human degradation the Germans outdid themselves beyond everything we have ever heard and read about them. Thus act beings who have not only become beasts, but who are also wild with the shame of their own cowardice. The underground press often emphasizes this cowardice of the Germans during the struggle in the Ghetto, which doubtlessly lowered considerably the prestige of German "Aryan valor". Truly, the baring of the character of the Gestapo man and the German super-soldier is one of the great results of the revolt.

How did Polish public opinion react to the battle of the Ghetto?

We can find an answer in the underground publications appearing shortly after the revolt. Let us quote only a few significant excerpts. The *Biuletyn Informacyjny* writes on April 29th, 1943, No. 17 (172):

Polish public opinion, seeing only the path that leads to death (because the secrets of the camps were well guarded) and knowing the German invader, has had no illusions about the fate of the deported Jews. Deeply stirred, Polish public opinion found it impossible to understand why there was no struggle and resistance, why the Jewish police was so zealous and why those who remained alive were so apathetic. The tragedy of the Jews was conceived of as something fatalistic in its frightfulness by Polish public opinion and even more so because the civilized world did not react in an active way.

The second phase of the devilish destruction of the Jews in Poland began a week ago. The Germans started to evacuate from

SZANUJ WYSILEK DRUKARZY I KOLPORTERÓW.
ODDAJ PISMO W PEWNE RĘCE. NIE NISZCZ!

BIULETYN *informacyjny*

Rok V

Warszawa, 29 kwietnia 1943 r.

Nr. 17 (172)

Komunikat

1. Dnia 13.IV.43 o godz. 8.00 w Warszawie na ul. Rysiej został zastrzelony wyższy urzędnik Arbeitsamtu Hugo Dietz, który odznaczył się szczególnym okrucieństwem i zwyrodnieniem przy przeprowadzaniu łapanek w rejonie Otwocka.
2. Dnia 16.IV.43 o godz. 11.20 koło ubespieczalni na Wybrzeżu Kościuszkowskim został zastrzelony komisarz Ubespieczalni Bruno Kurth, szczególnie szkodliwy dla Polaków.

Kierownictwo Walki Konspiracyjnej.

30.IV.43.

OSTATNI AKT WIELKIEJ TRAGEDII

Od niemal roku umęczone przez najeźdźców społeczeństwo polskie miotało uczuciami zgrozy, wstrętu i oburzenia, jest świadkiem niespotykanej w nowożytnych dziejach świata zbrodni — zorganizowanej i planowej masakry całego narodu żydowskiego w Europie. Złożył się na nią poganizm, zielejąca zwyrodniała nienawiść doktryny hitlerowskiej, właściwa całemu narodowi niemieckiemu systematyczność w przeprowadzaniu czystek w jego historii zbrodniczych planów, oraz brak zorganizowanego czynnego oporu ze strony bestialsko wleczonych na rzeź Żydów.

Po zakończeniu przez Niemców przygotowań, polegających na zamknięciu w gettach polskich Żydów i zwieźieniu do nich licznych transportów Żydów z zachodniej Europy — rozpoczął się akt pierwszy tragedii. Pod komendą znaczonych trupami czaszkami SS-manów, najrozmaitszych rodzajów niemieccy oprawcy opróżniali dom po domu, dzielnicę po dzielnicy, miasto po mieście, pędząc niebezpieczne ofiary uśnianymi trupami drogami, lub wioząc

w barbarzyńskich warunkach pociągami do miejsc zbiorowej kaźni w Treblince, Bełżcu i Sobiborze. Tam nauka niemiecka rozwiązała celująco atrakcyjne dla niej zadanie zbiorowego unicestwienia, możliwie bez śladu, setek tysięcy ludzi. Mniejsze ośrodki żydowskie likwidowano na miejscu. Pozostawiono jedynie Żydów, których praca przydatna była dla niemieckiej machiny wojennej.

Spółczesność polskie, widząc własnymi oczami jedynie drogę do śmierci (bo tajemnice obozów były dobrze strzeżone), znając, niemieckiego najeźdźcę nie miało złudzeń co do losu wywożonych Żydów. Wstrząśnięte głęboko nie mogło pojąć braku walki i oporu, gorliwości policji żydowskiej i bierności pozostałych na pewien czas przy życiu. Tragedię Żydów odczuło jako coś fatalistycznego w swej grozie, spotęgowanej brakiem czynnej reakcji cywilizowanego świata.

Tydzień temu rozpoczął się akt drugi bestialskiego niszczenia Żydów w Polsce. Niemcy przystąpili do wywożenia

Warsaw the remaining 40,000 Jews. The Ghetto replied with armed resistance. The Jewish Fighter Organization began the struggle in spite of tremendous difficulties. With limited strength and very little arms, without water, blinded by smoke and fire the Jewish fighters defended streets and single houses, retreating silently step by step, not so much from the enemy using his most modern weapons, but primarily from the intolerable heat of the burning buildings in the congested area. Victory for the fighters could have meant only to help the escape of a number of those within the Ghetto walls, victory could have meant the weakening of the enemy; victory finally would have been death with arms in hand.

The passive death of the Jews until now had not created any new values; it was useless; but their death, gun in hand, can introduce new values in the life of the Jewish people and has crowned the agony of the Jews in Poland with the halo of armed struggle for the right to live. That is how Warsaw [Polish] public opinion reacted to the defence of the Ghetto, while listening appreciatively to the bursting salvos of the defenders, watching worriedly the reflection of the flames and the smoke of the ever-spreading conflagrations. The fighting citizens of the Polish state from behind the Ghetto walls have become closer to us. Polish public opinion can comprehend them better than those victims who were unresistingly dragged to their death. The armed revolt of the Ghetto is a hard blow to the already consistently waning prestige of Nazi Germany.

It is our strict Christian duty to aid those Jews who escaped from the burning Ghetto.

Robotnik of June 20, 1943 also adds the point that some of the positions of the Jewish fighters were encircled by live wires.

Among the actions of the defenders the newspaper assigns special recognition to the "full-scale counter-attack" launched by the brush-makers.

The newspaper *W.R.N.* of May 21, 1943, No. 10 (116) writes:

Warsaw has once more become the victim of fire and explosion. The Germans destroy house after house, street after street. The cynical proclamation of the head gangster of Warsaw, Fischer, declares that this barbarian act of destroying an entire district of our capital is due to the fact that Communists are hiding therein. But even children in Poland know that the Germans were forced to take these steps because they were unable to suppress the Jewish resistance.

The underground paper *Przez Walkę do Zwycięstwa* of May 20, 1943, No. 11 (80) publishes an appeal to the leaders of the united underground movement which reads:

The Polish people, permeated as it is with the Christian spirit, has never believed in double morality and has always despised the devilish anti-Jewish acts of the Germans. Since April 19, 1943, Poles regard the heroic fighting Jews with respect and pity. At the same time we have nothing but contempt for the Hitlerite murderers. We have always expressed our deepest condemnation of German anti-Jewish atrocities. We regard it as our duty to give the Jews all feasible help.

The *Robotnik* writes on May 1st, 1943, No. 113:

After the liquidation of the Cracow Ghetto the Nazi destruction column began finally to liquidate the Warsaw Ghetto. This time the Nazi hangmen were disappointed. The Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, most of them workers, had anticipated this possibility and had prepared themselves to fight. Their heroic resistance forced the Germans to wage war with field artillery and airplanes, to beleaguer the Ghetto in accordance with the traditional rules of military science. The Polish population of our capital sympathizes with the heroic Jews, and simultaneously it laughs with contempt at the German "heroes" of Stalingrad. During the first days of the revolt two flags were raised in the Ghetto—Polish and Jewish. There was also a banner that called the Polish population to solidarity. The first three tanks the Germans sent into the Ghetto did not return. Rumor says that the Jews stormed the Pawiak prison and liberated its inmates.

On June 20, 1943, the underground paper *Nowe Drogi* again refers to the battle in an article entitled "On the Ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto". After describing the almost two year record of the Germans in regard to the Jews, the article goes on:

[The Germans] met with desperate armed resistance. Two or three thousand fighters forced them to retreat and when they returned with heavy machine guns, cannons and tanks, at very many points a bitter battle ensued, defence to the last grenade, to the last cartridge. The revolt proper did not last long. It was of course drowned in blood. But in the labyrinth of ruins, left from the September campaign [of 1939], in cellars and underground tunnels, in specially constructed secret chambers, there remained a number of people in hiding. Part of the fighters perished, some managed to escape outside the Ghetto walls. There remained in the Ghetto those who had walled themselves in with food supplies, most of them months earlier, in the

hope that underground they might be able to hold out until the end of the war. The Germans, in their impotence and cowardice, conceived the fiendish plan of killing them by fire and smoke, of suffocating those still alive, crushing them under the ruins. They burned a large portion of Warsaw, setting fire to house after house. The former "District of Jewish Settlement" ceased to exist.

The decision to destroy the Ghetto this way—apart from the tragedy itself—compromised the Germans in an extraordinary, most ridiculous manner. At the end of the fourth year of an unparalleled occupation, the Germans were forced to introduce their heaviest weapons and troops armed to the teeth, to install a veritable general staff, to suffer severe losses in order to overcome the resistance of several hundred . . . Jews. There is enough grim irony in this victory on the front of the Nalewki and Muranowska Streets in the face of setbacks and even defeats on all fronts of the world. These events of the great week in April bear a meaning deeper than irony—both politically and morally. On the roofs of the fighting Ghetto fluttered the Polish flag; the enemy took it down, only to have it appear again. The Jews carried on, in the tradition of the September days of the defence of Warsaw, the fight for freedom under the banner of the Republic. The Jewish national minority produced units which of their own free will joined the struggle against our common enemy. Their blood therefore was not spilled in vain. Once again we emphasize the moral value of the tragic struggle, full of pathos and hopelessness. The Polish democratic camp joins public opinion of the capital and of Poland not only in their compassion for the sufferings—suffering is the lot of all of us—but also in genuine respect for those who chose and will choose a soldier's death instead of the death of a slave. The incomparably cynical proclamation of Governor Fischer explains the decision to liquidate the Ghetto as a measure against the Communists; he demands that we denounce to the authorities "every living Jew." "No ethical principles come into consideration here," he states in so many words.

The black clouds of smoke from the blazing Ghettos float over Poland day and night. They will not obscure the German crime, nor the heroism of the fighters, nor our conscience.

The reaction of the German occupation authorities to their defeat may be gauged by the fact that immediately after the revolt the head of the S. S. and of the police in the Warsaw district, Von Sammern, was dismissed. He was replaced by Police General Stroop, the head of the Gestapo. According to the report of *Walka*, No. 18, May 12, 1943, Governor Fischer of

Warsaw was also removed from his position and transferred to Lublin.

The *Biuletyn Informacyjny* of July 8, 1943, reports that at night gunfire and explosions are still heard in the Warsaw Ghetto. The number of apartment houses which the Germans are now systematically destroying is more than double the number of those laid waste by the bombardment of 1939.

The report of the government representative arrives at these figures: during the military operations of 1939, according to his reports, 78,000 rooms were destroyed and during the liquidation of the Ghetto over 100,000. The streets of Nalewki, Nowolipki, Nowolipie, Franciszkańska, Karmelicka, Niska, Miła, Muranowska, Smocza, Gęsia and many others have been completely razed.

On the second day of the revolt the Polish Labor Movement published an appeal which reads:

Condemned to death by Hitler, the Jews in the Ghetto refused to submit passively to the Nazi hangmen. They are fighting the bloody brutes with dogged determination; they are defending their rights as citizens and their dignity as men.

Once again flames redden the skies over Warsaw, once again the streets of the city resound with the fire of guns and cannons, with the explosion of bombs. Workers and the working intelligentsia are the heart and soul among the masses of fighting Jews who arose, gun in hand, against Nazi atrocities.

At this historic moment it is of tremendous importance for Poland and the whole world to realize the significance of each episode in our struggle for liberation. The battle of Krasnobród, a number of encounters between the underground armed forces of Poland and the Nazi aggressor, the present armed struggle of the Polish citizens squeezed in behind the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto—these are witnesses of Poland's undying hatred for the invader, of our unbreakable determination to regain complete independence. Not one drop of blood, spilled in these battles for freedom, will have been spilled in vain. Each new sacrifice will cement more firmly the future edifice of freedom and social justice for all citizens of a new Poland.

We send our brotherly greetings to the Jewish workers and intelligentsia who, in face of inescapable death, have preferred to die with gun in hand, rather than submit to the hangman.

We solemnly swear that their deeds shall not be forgotten. They will be one with the heroic legends of fighting Poland. That will be the common heritage of the Polish nation, a heritage that will provide a firm basis for the edifice of the future regenerated Polish republic.

The declaration closes with an appeal to the world for help and promises a general Polish uprising, as soon as the Allies begin the offensive against the German armies.

A few words about the documents just quoted. In the beginning of my address I pointed out the reasons for the lack of resistance until April. The reproofs in some underground papers as to the belatedness of the Jewish revolt are out of place especially in view of the restraint which the Polish underground for obvious reasons imposes upon itself. To start the fight the men and women in the Ghetto needed the conviction that the Polish population would extend to them not only sympathy but full cooperation as well. There is no reason to believe that the hope for such support could have been justified. And again it must be emphasized that the deportations had disorganized and both spiritually and politically broken the Jewish population.

Almost all underground publications, as well as the reports of the government representative, speak of the Jewish Fighter Organization which began and led the struggle. We have no information whatsoever on how this organization came into being, but both the appeal of the Polish Labor Movement and some newspapers indicate that the organization consisted chiefly of workers, most of them young. But there is no doubt that from the very beginning all inhabitants of the Ghetto joined in the battle, irrespective of age, ideology and background.

The proclamation of Governor Fischer has been mentioned several times. We have not as yet secured a copy of the proclamation, but the quotations show that the Nazi authorities attempted to cover up their crime with political pretexts.

The first report on the Ghetto revolt broadcast by the Polish underground radio station *Świt* on April 22, mentioned the name of Michael Klepfish who fell in battle and characterized him as "the pillar of the resistance". This young engineer, 28 years old, was trained for struggle in the prewar Jewish

labor movement. We have no knowledge of any other names of the heroes who fell in the Ghetto battle, of those unknown soldiers from all sections of the Jewish population. Through various channels quite a few names of public leaders, writers and journalists who perished before the revolt began reached us. They will last in our memory as victims of Nazism and fighters for freedom. But here I must limit myself to the revolt as such. Let us hope that we shall succeed in obtaining as many names as possible of those who died in order that the Jewish people in Poland might live. The memory of each of them is sacred to us.*

I want to point to one other detail in connection with the resistance. All reports, all newspapers, speak of the part played by underground canals, by sewer pipes, by walled-up basements, where Jews still alive have hidden. I simply want to restate this fact and leave the rest to your imagination and feelings.

From the documents read we can see that it was the Polish Underground Labor Movement that was most closely concerned with the revolt.

Several people who arrived from Poland spoke of the participation of the Small Ghetto in the struggle. Unfortunately this is not correct. The official reports of the government representative as well as the underground papers state beyond doubt that the Small Ghetto was entirely isolated from the large one during the revolt and that its inhabitants, nearly 5,000 in number, were evacuated from Warsaw during the first half of May.

The Warsaw revolt stirred the fighting spirit of the Jewish population all over the country. At the end of the summer of 1943, in August or September, fighting broke out in Białystok. So far we have only one short communication on this battle as broadcast by the secret station *Świt*. According to this report, 300 German soldiers fell during the struggle. *Świt* announced that Jewish workers led the battle. Unfortunately we still have no further data on this resistance in Białystok. Over the

* As this pamphlet goes to press, the first list of persons who fell in the Ghetto battle was received in New York. It contains 222 names.

fields and forests of Poland now wander dozens of new Jewish guerrilla units, fighting for their lives and avenging the blood of their brethren.

I have tried to be as cool as possible in my account of the revolt. I have tried to stifle the pain, the admiration and the feeling of guilt that is ours. When the day of reckoning dawns and the tribunal of the world will pass judgment on the deeds of heroism in the struggle against the forces of evil, Jewish resistance in Poland will be part of the evidence submitted. Will there be one among us capable and worthy enough to present this miraculous evidence to the world? I hope that there will still be a Jewish people in Europe and they will be the ones to tell humanity of the moral summits attained by the Warsaw Ghetto fighters in their unequalled self-sacrifice.

THE YIDDISH SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE—YIVO, INC.

The Institution for Research and Training in the Domain of Jewish Social Studies

The Yiddish Scientific Institute was founded in 1925 in Vilna, Poland, for the scientific study of Jewish life throughout the world with particular emphasis on its sociological aspects. At the outbreak of the present war the headquarters of the Institute was transferred to New York, where an American branch had already been in existence, and the work has been continued here. At the end of 1942, a spacious building to house the Institute was acquired in the academic center of New York City.

The Yivo has four research sections: for history, economics and statistics, psychology and education, language and literature. Each section publishes monographs and collections of studies from time to time. Besides these, three periodicals are published: *Yivo Bleter*, a bi-monthly in which papers of all sections are presented; *Di Yidishe Shprakh*, a non-technical bi-monthly, devoted to the problems of standard Yiddish; *Newsletter of the Yivo* (*Yedies fun Yivo*), in Yiddish and English, a periodic illustrated bulletin of the Yivo's activities. Another periodical, *Yidishe Visnshaft*, recording developments in all fields of Jewish research, is scheduled to appear during the academic year 1944/45. The Yivo is also preparing for publication several volumes of its studies in English translation. To date, a total of over 36,000 pages of research studies has been published.

The Yivo maintains a Research Training Division (*Aspirantur*) to give college graduates the opportunity to serve a research apprenticeship in association with mature scholars. A Junior Training Department (*Proaspirantur*) is attached to this division. Both offer annual fellowships to qualified students. The Aspirantur is being developed into a YIVO GRADUATE SCHOOL FOR JEWISH SOCIAL STUDIES.

The Central Jewish Library and Archives of the Yivo in New York has by now over 35,000 catalogue entries. In addition the Archives possess extensive collections of documents, manuscripts and leaflets. The Yivo has also already collected over 5,000 volumes for postwar European libraries.

The income of the Institute is derived from membership dues and contributions from Welfare Funds, organizations and individuals.

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